

BUYING HELP

Old PC needs new lease of life

Q I have a beloved PC, which my friend made for me four years ago. It has a Pentium II 233MHz processor, 512MB of RAM, a Supmicro Super P6SLS motherboard and an Nvidia RIVA TNT2 16MB graphics card. I use Windows XP Professional Edition, Office 2003 and Adobe Photoshop Elements.

If possible, I would like to install the best graphics card available and add a SCSI drive for the operating system and programs. Can you please advise on the best way forward and provide any other suggestions?

Dan Reid, via email

A It's an impressive feat to run such modern programs on a 10-year-old PC. When a PC reaches this age, it becomes very difficult to upgrade. Processor sockets change on a regular basis, so newer processors won't physically fit. Motherboard chipsets also constantly evolve, so even if a processor physically fits in a socket it may not be compatible with your motherboard. Even graphics card slots change from time to time.

Your motherboard has an AGP graphics card slot, which has recently been superseded by PCI Express. There are still a few AGP graphics cards around, such as ATI's Radeon X1950 Pro, but you'll have trouble finding any stock. Your motherboard also has an AGP 2x slot, while all modern AGP graphics cards require an AGP 4x or 8x slot. Even if the cards worked with your motherboard, their performance would be crippled by the speed of your processor. The graphics card you have is fine for 2D applications, but you won't be able to play games without buying a new PC.



▲ Upgrading your old PC may not make economic sense, but building a new one can be cheap and easy

It's also not really possible to fit a current SCSI hard disk to your PC. Your motherboard has a SCSI controller built in, but it uses the older Ultra Wide SCSI standard. All the SCSI hard disks you can buy require an Ultra 320 SCSI interface, so you'd need to buy an expansion card. Ultra 320 SCSI cards require a PCI Express slot, which your motherboard doesn't have. Even if you could fit a SCSI hard disk, it's doubtful that it would make your PC any quicker, because the processor would still be the slowest component.

Sometimes it's easier to start again. You can build a new PC from scratch for as little as £250, with modern components and a fully upgradable motherboard. Read *PC Builder*, *Shopper* March 2007 for details.

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or you're wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us to provide a more accurate advice.

Chris Finnermore

Our Labs Manager can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.



buyinghelp@computershopper.co.uk

Partitions in Windows Vista

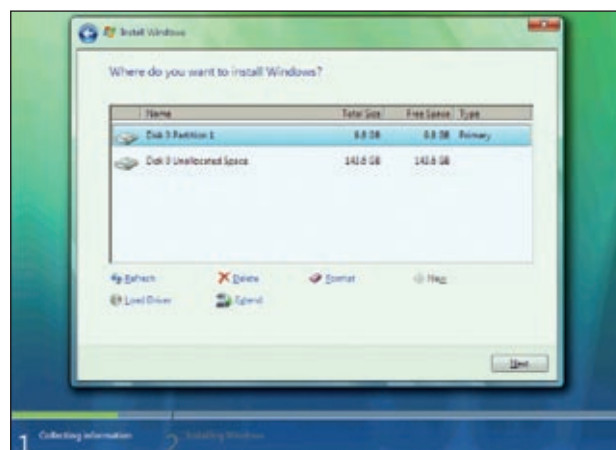
Q I have been using Paragon Partition Manager 8.0 to create and move partitions to my heart's content. However, I recently upgraded my PC with a RAID array and Windows Vista. I wanted to create a new partition on my RAID disks, but when I installed Paragon 8.0 I was told it doesn't work with Vista.

Undeterred, I installed Windows XP on a separate drive and installed the partition software again, only to find that it won't partition RAID disks. Is there any (preferably free) software that will let me partition my RAID array under Windows XP and possibly Vista? I have two 250GB hard disks working as one 500GB drive.

Douglas Morton, via email

A You shouldn't need to use an extra Windows XP installation to partition your RAID disks. You can simply use Vista's own installation program to create the partition.

Create your RAID array in the normal way. Now boot from the Windows Vista DVD. When the installer asks you where you want to install Windows, click the Drive Options (advanced) button to bring up further



▲ Creating a partition on a RAID array is easy with Windows Vista's installation program

options. You can then click the New button to create a partition. Type in the size of partition you want and click Apply. The partition will be created and you can select the partition on which you want to install Vista, then click Next to start the installation process.

If you still want to use Paragon Partition Manager to organise your partitions, the latest version supports Windows Vista and is free on this month's cover DVD.

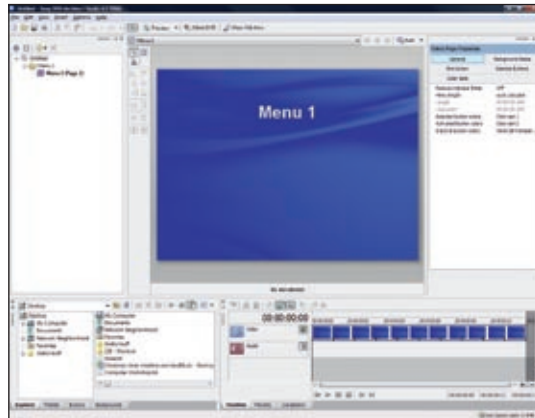
Professional touch for home movies

Q I have been using Nero to create my home DVDs. However, I want to make them look more professional by adding menu options such as Play All, Chapters and Extra. I would also like to add surround-sound support to the DVD, which Nero does not allow me to do.

Which software would you recommend that I buy in order to make my home movies look more professional?

Mark Alleyne, via email

A The best software for this task is Sony DVD Architect Studio, which costs £25 including VAT from www.amazon.co.uk. Its menu-design options are far more sophisticated than those of any other low-cost software. The only thing that it doesn't support is surround-sound encoding, although it can import surround soundtracks



▲ Sony's DVD Architect Studio is a good-value way to create professional-looking DVDs

already encoded to Dolby Digital format in your video-editing software.

You can find a review of this software at www.computershopper.co.uk/reviews/105255, and you can download a free 30-day trial from <http://tinyurl.com/24gnr6>.

Graphics upgrade for novice gamer

Q A few months ago, I built myself a PC. I was on a fairly tight budget at the time, so I went for an ECS GeForce 6100SM-M motherboard with integrated graphics. Unfortunately, they're not powerful enough to play any current games. Could you please recommend a graphics card that will let me play the latest releases? The PC has a 1.8GHz AMD Sempron 3400+ processor and 512MB of RAM.

Ian Perrin, via email

A Integrated graphics are fine for 2D Windows applications, but they're nowhere near powerful enough for current games. Fortunately, your PC should be easy to upgrade with a powerful graphics card.

ECS's GeForce 6100SM-M motherboard has a PCI Express x16 slot, which is the current graphics card interface. The card you choose will depend on how long you want it to stay current and whether you're willing to upgrade to Windows Vista. Microsoft's latest graphics standard is DirectX 10; games coming out in the next six months will all be DirectX 10 compatible. To use DirectX 10, you'll need Windows Vista and a DirectX 10-compatible graphics card. Our current favourite is EVGA's 8800GTS ACS3, which is £220 from www.scan.co.uk. It's incredibly quick in current DirectX 9 games and should be able to handle future DirectX 10 releases.

If you don't want to upgrade to Vista and just want to play current games, you can save some money by buying a DirectX 9 graphics



▲ Sapphire's Radeon X1950 Pro can play all current games and is very good value

card. Our current favourite is Sapphire's Radeon X1950 Pro. It has more than enough power for the latest games and is a bargain at just £83 including VAT from www.kikatek.com.

Both graphics cards need a six-pin PCI Express power connector, which your PC's power supply may not have, but they both come with an adaptor to convert two four-pin Molex plugs. Modern games are memory-hungry, and so you may want to think about upgrading your RAM.

Your motherboard takes 800MHz DDR2 memory, and you can buy a 512MB stick for £20 from www.crucial.com/uk. Your processor is also not the fastest, so if your games seem to be running slowly then consider an upgrade. Your motherboard can take all current AMD processors, such as the dual-core Athlon X2 4200+, which costs £40 from www.dabs.com.

Advice for telly addicts

Q I'd like to be able to record and play back digital TV, but I don't want to have to get a Sky subscription and use the Sky+ recording service. Is there an easy way to record Freeview broadcasts?

Peter Smalls, via email

A If you just need to record and play back TV, you should look at a Freeview hard disk recorder. These have integrated hard disks and can store hours of TV. They can also pause live TV with the TimeShift function, so you don't have to miss any of your favourite programmes if the phone rings.

Our current favourite is Top-Up TV's TUTV Anytime DTR. This has two digital tuners, so you can watch one program while recording another, or record two programmes at once. It's only £100 and comes with a free one-month subscription to the Top-Up TV service, which offers a few extra digital channels.

Wanted: card reader for Windows 98

Q Can you tell me if there is a multi-card reader (SD and CompactFlash) that is compatible with Windows 98 (not Windows 98 SE) and USB1.1 ports?

PR Edmonds, via email

A Current operating systems such as Windows XP and Windows Vista don't need drivers for simple USB devices such as USB flash drives and card readers, but older Windows operating systems do. Many card readers come with a CD containing the relevant drivers. However, every card reader we have seen comes with drivers that require at least Windows 98 SE, not 98 or 95. USB support under Windows 98 was fairly primitive and there were many changes made to the way Windows 98 implemented USB in Windows 98 SE.

You don't say if you've managed to get any other USB devices to work with your copy of Windows. If a simple USB device such as a flash drive works, there's a chance a card reader will work with your PC using the Windows 98 SE driver. SanDisk's ImageMate 12-in-1 card reader works with Windows 98 SE and USB1.1 ports, and is available from www.expansys.com for £19 including VAT. If you have no luck, upgrade to Windows XP, which is £51 from www.ebuyer.com.

► Many card readers come with drivers for Windows 98 SE, but they may not work correctly under Windows 98

